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ABSTRACT

The premise that institutions pass through a grief process in adjusting to declining resources and radical changes, is proposed. In addition, strategies that administrators can use to respond to institutional grief are suggested. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross's paradigm of five grief stages/reactions to serious loss are described: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. In addition, William E. Avera's application of the Kubler-Ross grieving paradigm to groups and organizational settings, specifically the nation's reaction to the loss of cheap energy, is considered. The way that each grief stage may be manifested in higher education and possible actions and responses by college leaders are discussed. It is concluded that the paradigm's major usefulness could be helping those involved to better understand the affective aspects of dealing with institutional grief and to avoid taking personally any angry individual and group reactions associated with grief. This approach may also assist institutional leaders in dealing with the grief they experience personally due to financial and other crises. Leaders' personal reactions to adverse situations might inhibit them in working with others to find solutions. (SW)

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Good Grief!

Kenneth A. Shaw
Thomas C. Britton

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Financial Perils in Higher Education—

Good Grief!

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October 1983

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Foreword

Responding effectively to the growing fiscal restraints on higher education requires an ever-expanding range of presidential resources. In *Financial Perils of Higher Education–Good Grief*, authors Kenneth A. Shaw and Thomas C. Britton put forward an intriguing argument: that institutions, like individuals, pass through a grief process that administrators must understand in order to deal responsibly with the changing financial realities in higher education. After explaining their premise, the authors go on to suggest a number of strategies administrators can use to respond to institutional grief.

It has always been the Association's goal to provide member presidents and chancellors with materials that increase their professional development and to help them cope with the pressures of the presidency. To that end we offer *Financial Perils of Higher Education–Good Grief*. I trust that AASCU members will find the essay lively, readable, and provocative. And I am grateful to Chancellor Shaw and Thomas Britton, both of Southern Illinois University, for making their manuscript available to us.

Allan W. Ostar, President
American Association of State
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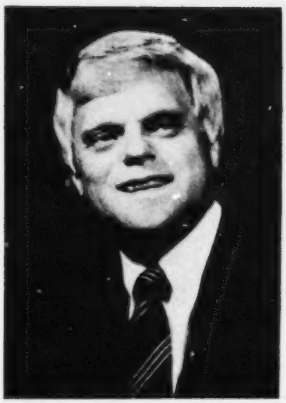
About the Authors



Kenneth A. Shaw, 44, has served as Chancellor of The Southern Illinois University System since 1979. Previously, he served as President of Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville (SIUE), and, before joining SIUE, served as Vice President and Dean of Towson State University (MD). Shaw, an authority on evaluation and the group process in higher education, earned his Ph.D. in sociology and counseling at Purdue University and is a Professor of Sociology at SIUE. He resides in Edwardsville.

Thomas C. Britton, 34, has served as Executive Assistant to the Chancellor since 1979. Previously, he served as Administrative Counsel to The Southern Illinois University Board of Trustees. An authority on governance and organization in higher education, he has taught in the Department of Accountancy and Higher Education at SIU Carbondale. A member of the Illinois Bar, he earned his Juris Doctor from Southern Illinois University, and he resides in Carbondale.

This publication emerges in part from conversations between the authors about the reactions within the higher education community to a variety of "Financial Perils." Southern Illinois University, with constituent universities located in Edwardsville and Carbondale, enrolls nearly 35,000 students in academic programs ranging from two-year technical programs to doctoral programs in over twenty disciplines and professional programs in law, medicine, and dental medicine.

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Introduction

Enough has been written recently about the financial perils facing institutions of higher education that an entrepreneurial college president could collect copies of all the papers, articles, and newspaper accounts related to the problem, sell them to a recycling center, and, at least temporarily, rapidly move cash balances from red to black. The language of the day, which includes references to getting by on less, retrenchment, priority setting, financial exigency, strategic planning, ad nauseam, reflects the problem, but it also describes how institutions of higher education have attempted to cope with their financial traumas. New evidence need not be offered to prove that the decade ahead will be a financially difficult one for higher education. It is common wisdom that the maintenance of quality during the next decade will require the setting of institutional priorities and an intense commitment to mission regardless of adversity. In dealing with radically changed financial circumstances, college and university leaders often focus their attention on the objective problems they face and too often limit their consideration of the affective or emotional aspects of such problems.

In general, colleges and universities have responded to financial challenges by attempting to develop and articulate priorities in a consultative fashion and to recognize these priorities both in financial plans and in response to specific fiscal crises.

While this rational planning process should serve institutions well, one need only read the *Chronicle of Higher Education* or even a local newspaper to note that "all hell breaks loose" when difficult financial circumstances confront today's colleges and universities. Where is the rationality? The collegiality? What happened to the plan?

Surely, institutions and their leaders have foreseen financial difficulties and have attempted to deal with them. If so, why the anger, the explosions, and the seeming inability or unwillingness to deal with problems at hand? In our effort to deal with what is essentially an objective problem, we often overlook or misjudge the affective factors which come into play when institutions are forced to deal with radically changed circumstances.

We have learned from Elisabeth Kubler-Ross[1] and others that individuals, when they learn that they are terminally ill, when they experience job loss, or when they face other traumatic circumstances, pass through specific stages of adjustment, including *grief*. Individuals must work through their grief, and most often the reassurances and support given by loved ones does not eliminate either the grief or the need for a grieving process. William E. Avera has suggested that the stages of grieving are applicable to group and organizational settings, and he has applied the Kubler-Ross paradigm to this nation's reaction to the loss of cheap energy.[2]

The Kubler-Ross model can, we believe, prove helpful in dealing with what we call "institutional grief"—affective institutional reactions to radically changed circumstances. One can observe that colleges and universities, when adjusting to the bad news of declining resources or other traumas, appear to pass through many of the same stages of grief described by Kubler-Ross, Avera, and others. What follows is an exploration of these stages of grief, as they might apply to institutions of higher education, and suggestions for dealing with these affective aspects of institutional grief.

The Grief Cycle

Kubler-Ross asserts that the grief cycle includes five stages: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance, which an individual must pass through in order to eventually cope realistically with a radically changed circumstance.

Denial

Kubler-Ross sees denial as an effective buffer after one receives shocking news. Denial allows the individual to bide time and mobilize the less radical defenses.[3] William Avera, in describing this stage as a part of this nation's reaction to the loss of cheap energy—probably a more useful analogy for our purposes—says that Americans "hang on to the belief that the energy shortage is not genuine. They rationalize that as soon as the forces creating the temporary energy shortage achieve their objectives, prices and availability will return to normal."[4]

In higher education denial takes many forms. More than one college president reports that attempts to inform the university community about fiscal difficulties do not seem to be heard. Later these presidents find themselves being criticized for keeping people in the dark, with campus groups suggesting that if they would do their job in explaining the institution's needs to the outside world that ample money would be available—and there would be no problem. How often have we heard the assertion that by cutting administrative costs we could eliminate any financial problem that might occur?

Another form of institutional denial is for campus groups simply to abdicate any responsibility for dealing with crises. "These are administrative problems and when the administration has developed a plan, we'll comment on it. Until then, we won't become involved." Denial, then, takes many forms, but the main ingredient is to block or filter the bad news.

Anger

Bad news often results in anger, which Kubler-Ross suggests "is commonly displaced in all directions and projected onto the environment at times almost at random."[5] Anger that lacks direction is especially difficult to manage, as any unsuccessful bearer of bad news can tell you. Avera states that in the anger stage consumers grieving over the loss of cheap fuel, "lash out at politicians, oil companies, utilities, or regulatory commissions. Someone must be blamed and those responsible must be punished."[6] He notes that anger is an especially ugly phase of the grief process; it is, however, something through which individuals and groups must pass.

There are many examples of the anger stage as it applies to grief in higher education. At one institution, the faculty decided that the administration should set funding priorities and make its recommendations known. Priorities were set and publicized as agreed; nevertheless, the faculty called for the resignation of the provost who had developed the priorities and the chancellor under whose authority the provost had acted.

Votes of no confidence often follow administrators' attempts to create an awareness of financial difficulties and deal with financial grief. Often anger will be displaced, and in some cases reactions to bad news are far removed from the problem itself. We suggest that many crises on our campuses may be the result of displaced/misplaced anger. When analyzed objectively, these crises often center on relatively minor issues that catch administrators totally unaware. How often have you wondered, how could this have caused such a reaction?

Bargaining

Bargaining is seen by Kubler-Ross as "an attempt to postpone . . . to include a prize offered for 'good behavior'."[7] Avera indicates that consumers when reaching the bargaining stage, "grant the inevitability of changing their ways of living, but they hope to postpone them. They hope for one more summer of air conditioning unfettered by high temperature settings or the bother of insulation."[8]

One way of looking at the bargaining stage is that it's simply a more sophisticated form of denial, more sophisticated because it has been practiced throughout both the denial and anger stages. Often, bargaining is suggested in relatively innocent statements such as, "Without steady-state or increased funding, we can make no assurances of continued program quality," or "Higher education's share of state resources is shrinking. An increase in that share would allow us to address the many economic or larger societal problems that beg to be addressed." One might catalogue the "If only. . ." statements one hears during a time of financial woe. Many could be classified as offers to bargain.

Of the stages of grief, bargaining is probably the least discrete, and, except as it is described as a part of the other stages, it will not be addressed.

Depression

Kubler-Ross distinguishes two types of depression. The first is a reaction to immediate circumstances, and often an individual will respond to attempts to be "cheered up." The second is a necessary step in preparation for accepting impending loss, and is often characterized by an inability to "look on the bright side." Avera says that depression shows itself in a sense of loss leaving the consumer unable to formulate a response or do appropriate planning. "Homeowners in this stage may freely admit that they don't know how heating and cooling bills for the coming year will fit into their household budgets, but they are unable to develop plans for holding utility bills in check."[9]

On college and university campuses, one hears that "morale is at an all time low"–that the current or impending difficulties are leaving the campuses with little sense of hope. The institution seems to be going through the motions of teaching and research, and while "good news" will create a real but fleeting glimmer of hope, there is little zest–little enthusiasm for what is being done. It appears to many that things can only get worse, and nothing they can do will make it better. At times, despair might be a more appropriate description than depression.

Acceptance

To Kubler-Ross this, the final stage of grief, is one nearly void of feelings. It is the stage at which the individual will be neither depressed nor angry, but, instead, will now be able to express earlier feelings and focus attention on preparing for the inevitable.

Avera states, "after consumers have completed the experience of the first four stages, they may be able to move to acceptance. Only then can a homeowner deal with, and respond to, the new economics of energy by making appropriate lifestyle adjustments."[10]

For higher education, acceptance does not mean submitting to an untenable situation–giving up. Rather, it means that the institution has reached a plateau from which it can move forward to deal with its problems–to set priorities, to make hard choices, to progress in areas where improvements can be accomplished–to work through its problems in a constructive fashion. While things may not be as they once were, a sense of calm and understanding which comes with acceptance can lead to a realization that the institution has control over its own destiny.

Application of the Model

Before we move on to explore some strategies for dealing with the stages of grief at institutions of higher learning, some com-

ments about the application of the Kubler-Ross paradigm to institutions are in order. Little scholarly work has been done to substantiate the appropriateness of the paradigm's application to social institutions. This paper is intended only as an exploration of the idea, not as a definitive analysis of the many questions which should be and are likely to be asked and answered by scholars.

First, a few caveats. The stages do not occur as discretely as they are presented above. For example, we often witness our college and university colleagues denying that a problem exists and simultaneously, in their anger, calling for the expulsion of those who deliver bad news.

Moreover, the grief process doesn't necessarily follow each step in the order outlined by Kubler-Ross. In many situations, entire steps will be bypassed or taken in a different order from the ones suggested above.

Finally, having passed through one stage and into another does not necessarily mean that an individual institution will not regress. As institutions move through the grief process associated with fiscal stress, they might move from the acceptance stage back to anger or denial.

Although it may not apply narrowly and to every institutional situation, the paradigm does have meaning in an institutional context. Its use comes from the understanding it helps us achieve, and from the specific courses of actions it suggests be undertaken.

Strategies for Dealing with Institutional Grief

The paradigm's major value may be in helping those involved better understand the affective aspects of dealing with institutional grief. All too often, campus leaders will focus primarily on the rational aspects of a problem, dealing with the problem as stated, and neglecting group and individual feelings about unpleasant events. The paradigm, then, reminds us that the affective aspect of dealing with institutional grief should not be ignored. The paradigm may also help institutional leaders maintain a more balanced perspective when confronted with individual and group behavior that is not easily understood. This recognition might help leaders avoid taking personally those angry individual and group reactions associated with grief.

The model might also prove helpful to individual institutional leaders personally as they work through the institutional grief stages. If institutional leaders have not dealt with their own personal reactions to adverse situations, they may not be likely to understand the reactions of others, or to help others work through the grief process. For example, a college president stuck in the denial stage may not be able to provide campus leadership to those whose help and support the leader must have. Likewise, an institutional spokesperson fixed on anger or depression may have little of a constructive nature to offer colleagues. Institutional leaders' personal reactions to adverse situations might inhibit them in working with others to find solutions; they might well be creating problems.

Finally, the model may suggest various strategies and techniques which might help institutions move through the various states of institutional grief. Such techniques would, of course, need to be tailored for each individual situation. For example,

techniques employed to deal with grief associated with a declared financial exigency might differ from those employed to deal with individual program cutbacks.

What follows are some suggested techniques for dealing with the various stages of institutional grief.

Dealing with Denial

Applying the grief model to institutions suggests that institutions, like individuals, "see what they want to see and hear what they wan to hear." Because of this characteristic, repetition is important. George Orwell said, "we are now at a depth at which restatement of the obvious is the first duty of intelligent men." The message, because it is unpopular, will not always be heard, yet it must be repeated, although not necessarily in the same way. If identical messages are sent, they might be decoded in the same incomplete or inaccurate way.

To break through institutional denial, then, a variety of messages coming from a variety of sources should be used to help inform the university community about existing or impending conditions. This can be done through presidential utterances, but presidents shouldn't be surprised or disappointed if their messages are not heard the first or second time they are sent.

An effective way of sending the same message in a variety of ways is through key faculty, students, and staff and, of course, through members of the governing board—through both formal and informal means. By spending time with these key individuals early in the grief process, it is possible to develop a coterie of well-informed people who are able to effectively inform an entire university community. Central to this kind of communication is the need for these key individuals to be fully aware of the nature and extent of the problem the institution faces. Additionally, these individuals must have an opportunity to discuss the problem at length. By spending time with these people, institutional leaders can ensure the kinds of repetition necessary.

A second approach is to call in "visiting firemen." Using consultants and other external experts can be an effective means

of communicating bad news to the campus. For a number of reasons, individuals from outside an institution can often communicate a negative message more effectively than internal experts can. Importantly, external experts have the added advantage of being able to leave the campus before denial turns into anger—a luxury that institutional leaders do not enjoy.

Additionally, campus publications can heighten awareness of bad financial circumstances, but just as importantly, these publications can highlight efforts being undertaken to alleviate the problems. Highlighting the fact that problems are being managed might extend the denial stage; however, such statements can serve as reminders of actions already being undertaken when an institution approaches the acceptance stage.

Safe passage from the denial stage requires that institutional leaders—the senders of messages—have passed through the denial stage themselves. If not, their messages will not be believed. Safe passage also requires the development and use of a plan for involving and informing key members of the university community about the problems to be faced. The development of this plan is the responsibility of institutional leaders

Dealing with Anger

First and foremost, it is essential that institutional leaders not take expressions of anger personally, even when such expressions are directed at them. To some extent, understanding the causes of such anger makes institutional leaders better able to deal with it. Knowing that anger is a natural stage of the grief process allows institutional leaders to keep reactions in perspective.

In dealing with anger, it is important to deal with the stated issues which come from anger expressed. To indicate that the stated issues are not the real problem is likely to cause an even stronger reaction. Attempts should be made, however, to relate the expressed issues to the larger, but often not expressed, problems. Again, as with denial, instant success should not be expected. One student after hearing why tuition had to be increased

on a particular campus said, "I understand that additional money is needed so that we may continue to have quality academic programs. I understand that at this point in time raising tuition is probably the only adjustment that can be made. You have done a good job of explaining the facts, but you have to understand that *my* grant is being cut, and that summer jobs are almost impossible to find. Understanding the awful problem doesn't make me less angry."

At all stages throughout the grief process, but particularly during the anger stage, it is important that institutional leaders are available and that their staffs are available to deal with questions and concerns. The need for this availability comes from the need for a certain amount of ventilation. Those who are angry need an opportunity to vent that anger. Only by providing opportunities for the anger to be vented, can larger groups and the institution begin to sense that "we are in this together."

Of all the suggestions made to deal with institutional grief, this one is probably the most difficult to follow. It isn't easy for those who are the object of anger to remain calm, supportive, and available. Understanding the reasons for the anger helps, but is a peculiarly difficult challenge. Staff availability, however, is essential as angry colleagues are more apt to state their true feelings to them than to institutional leaders. There is no better time for visibility and availability to be emphasized, but staff will need encouragement from institutional leaders.

The anger stage is an important time for institutional leaders to remain close to their staffs, as mutual support is necessary. Because staff members are likely to become the objects of significant anger, institutional leaders will need to interpret what is happening to them, to remind them of the stages of grief, and to remind them that the anger does not represent personal vendettas. Staff members themselves will need opportunities to vent their own anger and to renew themselves so that they can continue to be effective listeners and spokespersons.

Finally, when meeting with staff, it is important for institutional leaders to discourage a "we/they attitude" about events which are taking place. This is, like many of the suggestions, easier said than done, but dwelling on we/they issues only heightens tension. Leaders must remind themselves that there is a

difference between constructive ventilation and excessive dwelling on the weaknesses or unfairness of others.

If none of the steps suggested above helps in an individual situation, perhaps the beleagured institutional leader can find solace in understanding that the expression of anger is a natural outcome of the grief process; it is not something that the institutional leader alone has caused or alone can control.

Dealing with Depression

Depression exists when people or organizations have lost hope—when they feel that their actions no longer make a difference. During the depression stage of institutional grief, it is important that institutional leaders demonstrate that while many members of the university community have "given up" that they, the leaders, haven't. It is also important to reassure members of the university community that while circumstances may be bad, the institution must and will continue to function.

When there is institutional grief, it is important to emphasize the positive. The greater the difficulty, the more important the need to keep positive activities going. There is no better time for institutional leaders to champion the cause of higher education. Major visible efforts can be launched that are designed to improve the overall financial condition through fundraising and through legislative efforts. Hope helps to lift depression, and hope comes from seeing strong advocates forcefully attempting to seek outside assistance for dealing with the institution's plight.

There is no better time to make changes to improve the quality of life of members of the university community, if they can be afforded. Whether these changes are adjustments in the work week, special health programs, a reduction in certain charges for faculty and staff services, institutional efforts offer some hope that even in difficult times things can be made better.

It is important that colleges and universities experiencing institutional grief engage in constructive internal activity rather than stopping everything to deal solely with the crisis at hand. Working to improve the quality of student writing, to improve

the general education program, to raise academic standards, or whatever, should continue. In fact, such activities should be intensified.

Highlighting positive campus achievements and events is also especially important during the depression stage. Any good college or university always has a number of things to celebrate–a successful accreditation visit, achievements by drama students or athletic teams, research projects which have been recognized through outside funding, to name just a few. Highlighting these events reminds those in the university community that even with its problems, the place where they spend most of their lives has value and meaning.

These and other activities are suggested to help institutions deal with the depression stage, to help its members believe that, while there are a number of problems, much of their future depends on their actions. Kubler-Ross suggests that no amount of good news can eliminate the depression stage. Even if this aspect of her paradigm is true, there is value in accenting the positive and ensuring that the essential work of the university community continues. Such activities, if nothing else, will lead to a stronger recovery from grief once an institution has reached the next stage in the process, acceptance.

Acceptance Strategies

The long awaited psychological moment has arrived, but there isn't likely to be time to savor it as there is much that will need to be done. Members of the community, now ready and willing to work through the problems at hand, need a sense of involvement. Strong leadership is as necessary during this recovery stage as it is during the earlier more difficult stages of the grief process. Members of the university community need to believe that their collective efforts can improve a troubling situation.

Acceptance is the time to get on with it, and if the acceptance stage is not approached carefully, an institution can easily regress to one of the earlier stages. The challenge before institutional leaders is to call upon their experiences and talents to lead. If leaders have properly prepared themselves for the grief process,

have insulated themselves psychologically from the anger and depression that is a natural by-product of grief, they will be in a position to lead effectively. The acceptance stage of grief provides that opportunity.

Conclusion

Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, William Avera, and others have suggested that when individuals and groups are faced with radically changed circumstances a number of predictable responses are likely. Applying the Kubler-Ross paradigm to institutions, colleges and universities in particular, may assist institutional leaders in understanding otherwise unexpected and unfathomable institutional behaviors. Applications of the paradigm also suggest strategies and techniques that can assist institutional leaders in constructively leading their institutions through the grief process.

The paradigm's major usefulness could be that of helping those involved better understand the affective aspects of dealing with institutional grief. All too often, we tend to focus primarily on the rational aspects of a problem, neglecting group and individual feelings about unpleasant events. A second potential benefit of the paradigm is that it may assist institutional leaders in dealing with the grief they experience personally due to the plight of their institutions.

In order for institutional leaders to deal constructively with the problems which result from financial or other crises, they must approach their own grief process, and they must have the sensitivity, stamina, strength, and sound judgment to help others in the university community to deal with the affective aspects of institutional grief. No small task.

NOTES

[1]Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, *On Death and Dying* (New York: MacMillan Co., 1969).

[2]William E. Avera, "Homeowners and Energy Costs," *Texas Business Review* (January–February, 1980).

[3]Kubler-Ross, p. 39.

[4]Avera, p. 42.

[5]Kubler-Ross, p. 50.

[6]Avera, p. 42.

[7]Kubler-Ross, p. 83.

[8]Avera, p. 42.

[9]Avera, p. 42.

[10]Avera, p. 42.